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Capturing life histories about movements into and out of poverty: A road with pits and bumps

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Abstract

In order to take into account the power imbalances typically implicated in knowledge production about the complex social problem of poverty, social work researchers have increasingly acknowledged the importance of grasping the viewpoints and perspectives of people in poverty situations. In this contribution, we accordingly reflect on a current life history research project that retrospectively explores the life stories of parents with young children with regard to their mobility into and out of poverty that is examined in dynamic interaction with social work interventions. In this article, we discuss methodological and ethical challenges and complexities that we unexpectedly encountered in our research venture, as illustrated by three exemplary vignettes. These examples demonstrate issues of power between the researcher and the research participants that are not only inevitable, but also generate dilemmas, struggles and ambiguities that often remain underexposed in the ways scientific insights are reported. Rather than disguising these pits and bumps, we argue for a reflexive research stance which makes these issues of power in knowledge production susceptible to contemplation and scrutiny.

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Introduction

During the last decades, biographical research has become a significant approach as part of the broader practice of qualitative research, and can be attributed to an increased concern with the life experiences of those who were usually not heard (Bertaux and Thompson, 1997; Booth and Booth, 1996; Miller, 2000). As Roberts (2002) asserts aptly, biographical research evolves as an exciting, stimulating and fast-moving field in which the interrelation between biography and society is interrogated. In that sense, it is claimed that this attempt to understand and situate individual life experiences within their historical, social, cultural and political context is part of a broader biographical or narrative turn in the social sciences (see Chamberlayne et al., 2000; Riessman and Quinney, 2005), which denotes approaches such as 'biography' and 'autobiography' (see Roberts, 2002), 'life story research' (Booth and Booth, 1996; Miller, 2000; Roets and Goedgeluck, 2007), 'family history research' or 'life history research' (Bertaux and Thompson, 1997; Miller, 2000) and 'oral history research' (Czarniawska, 2004; Thompson, 2000).

Only quite recently, the potential and relevance of biographical and narrative research approaches has been emphasized for social work research purposes (see Broadhurst, 2015). In a previous issue of *Qualitative Social Work*, Riessman and Quinney (2005: 405) stress that social work has embraced these approaches 'only to a very limited degree in research' although there is a 'storehouse of narrative approaches available in qualitative research literature'. Moreover, they assert that social work researchers who actually engage with narrative research approaches adopt 'reductionistic techniques, similar in effect to what quantitative researchers do with numbers'. Therefore, they conclude that the challenge for social work researchers is to give narrative approaches a valuable place in social work. In the meantime, it can be argued that the social work academia is indebted to their call, which has received considerable attention (see Broadhurst, 2015).

Here, we reflect on a current life history research project conducted in Flanders (the Flemish speaking part of Belgium) in which the life histories and welfare strategies of families in poverty situations were retrospectively explored and captured in dynamic interaction with the strategies and interventions of social workers (see Schiettecat et al., 2016). Remarkably, however, our project produced particular methodological and ethical challenges and complexities that were emerging before and during the research process. Since biographical research 'is a practice that is not merely enacting a prescribed research role according to steps in a manual' yet requires a recognition of the reflexive role of the researcher (Roberts, 2002: 173), we aim to articulate how we embraced reflexivity in life history research as social work researchers (see D'Cruz and Jones, 2004; Roose et al., 2016).

In what follows, we first address how we situated and positioned our life history approach alongside the current interest of researchers in dynamic analyses of

poverty. Secondly, we address methodological and ethical considerations and concerns that were essential in constructing our research process. Thirdly, we discuss how our approach provoked tangible and unforeseen complexities in the research process. We conclude this article by issuing some concluding reflections and recommendations for future research in social work.

A dynamic understanding of mobility into and out of poverty: A complex issue

The central aim of our project was to identify which social work practices and interventions were experienced as supportive by parents with young children who were moving into and out of poverty over time. We used a life history research approach (see Bertaux and Thompson, 1997; Miller, 2000; Roberts, 2002) to uncover the range of strategies that were established by the parents 'to mediate and negotiate the impact of disadvantage on their lives' (Ridge and Millar, 2011: 81), and to capture the complex ways in which the parents practiced their agency in relation to material and immaterial (or social) resources and structural constraints (Lister, 2004). The approach aligns with a recent interest of poverty researchers in unravelling the dynamics of poverty based on longitudinal qualitative research (see Alcock, 2004; Dewilde, 2003; Kothari and Hulme, 2004; Millar, 2007; Ridge and Millar, 2011). These scholars commit to provide insights in 'how people perceive their situations over time, how they engage with other people, deal with institutions and actively shape their circumstances and opportunities' (Ridge and Millar, 2011: 88). Their plea for longitudinal qualitative research originates from an emphasis on an understanding of the problem of poverty as a dynamic process (Millar, 2007), which implies that:

> poverty should not be seen as a more or less permanent product of structural social relations and location within these, but rather is likely to be a temporary phenomenon (short-term, long-term or recurrent) encountered by different individuals in different circumstances or at different times in their life course. (Alcock, 2004: 398)

Back in 1986, for example, Bane and Ellwood (1986: 1) discussed the groundbreaking finding that 'much of the research on the dynamics of poverty during the 1970's (...) seemed to show that the bulk of poor were poor for only a few years'. While revealing that people were slipping into and out of poverty, 'research also showed that poor were a very heterogeneous group, including a small minority of persistently poor' (Bane and Ellwood, 1986: 1). This finding shed another light on the question of the allocation of resources and the development of anti-poverty policies, since this differentiation between what they call permanent and transitory poverty destabilized the idea of an underclass that rests on assumptions about the long-term nature of poverty (Bane and Ellwood, 1986). Alcock (2004: 405) follows this reasoning, arguing that there is no empirical evidence to support the claims of anti-welfare critics such as Murray (1996) that welfare support creates an

underclass of people drifted down the social hierarchy who have opted for a life of welfare dependency. In that sense, Bane and Ellwood (1986: 2) refer to the importance of generating knowledge about the experiences of people who ever slip into and out of poverty, and more in particular about 'the events leading to the beginnings and endings of spells of poverty'.

Nevertheless, Alcock (2004) reveals that researching movements into and out of poverty is a very complex affair, referring to at least two central concerns in dynamic analyses of poverty: a first concern refers to the contribution of *qualitative* longitudinal research, and a second point of interest implies the necessary balance between agency and structure.

The contribution of qualitative longitudinal research

Dynamic analyses of poverty have traditionally been conducted on the basis of static and descriptive quantitative data (Dewilde, 2003), that are mainly collected by large-scale questionnaire surveys across a population of respondents at a particular point in time (see McKay and Lawson, 2002). In an attempt to objectively describe causal patterns and correlates of social and economic mobility, these studies do provide a snapshot of the structural features of social relations (Kothari and Hulme, 2004; Taylor, 2008). Nevertheless, it is argued that this mainstream snapshot view cannot explain why these movements occur and should be enriched by taking into account dynamic research that shows 'poverty like a film, as opposed to a static image' (Taylor, 2008: 47). As Alcock (2004: 401) asserts, quantitative studies 'are likely to be at the level of structure and they will not shed much light on how the changes have come about. To observe change, and in particular to seek to explain it, we need to examine not snapshots but moving pictures'. In that vein, Taylor (2008) argues for enriching these quantitative research studies by combining them with qualitative research approaches in order to enhance our current knowledge about the dynamics of poverty. Millar (2007: 534) in this context suggests that we need qualitative longitudinal research to address questions of experience and motivation which cannot be captured by quantitative surveys, and therefore focus attention 'on the active ways in which people are (or are not) able to respond to their situations and in particular their responses to risk events, and the resources that they are able to call upon to deal with these'.

In our approach to life history research, however, we follow the claim of Riessman and Quinney (2005: 398) for the field of social work research that 'the challenge for narrative research is not to mimic positivist science in modes of data reduction'. We wanted to give depth to rich and 'extended accounts of lives in context' instead of fragmenting experiences into snippets of talk to illustrate prestructured categories and issues (Riessman and Quinney, 2005: 394). Rather than 'applying and adapting traditional methodological principles, criteria and procedures' according to a (neo-)positivistic and quantitative research approach (Roberts, 2002: 37–40), we assumed that the construction of life histories should be grounded in a collaboration between the interviewer and the research subject(s). The

narrative life history research approach as proposed by Miller (2000: 130) endorses this viewpoint, 'taking the standpoint that ''reality'' is malleable and multiple and a focus upon social aspects of the interaction between the interviewee and interviewer' should be highlighted. As such, biographical research evolves in a triangular process between the researcher and the research subject, whereas they can both contribute to the ways in which new knowledge is generated with reference to the central research aims and questions (Miller, 2000). In that sense, biographical research ventures allow research subjects to tell their life history 'not on the basis of predetermined responses to predefined objects, but rather as interpreters, definers, signalers, and symbol and signal readers' (Bogdan and Biklen, 1998: 25). Therefore, we did not use a pre-established definition of *mobility into and out of poverty* in the life histories of the research subjects, but approached it as a sensitizing concept, which gained meaning through the research interaction (Bogdan and Biklen, 1998). Blumer (1954: 7) explained that sensitizing concepts give the user 'a general sense of reference and guidance in approaching empirical instances. Whereas definitive concepts provide prescriptions of what to see, sensitizing concepts merely suggest directions along which to look' and still require processes of negotiation and interpretation. This involvement of both the researcher and the research subject(s), however, reminds us to a central concern for the potential power gap between researcher and researched when studying the life worlds of people who belong to marginalized groups in terms of their material, social, and symbolic resources (Krumer-Nevo, 2002, 2009). We will further discuss this issue in our methodological and ethical considerations.

Balancing between agency and structure

Biographical methodologies are mainly devoted to providing 'access to the perspectives and experience of oppressed groups who lack the power to make their voices heard through traditional modes of academic discourse' (Booth and Booth, 1996: 55). The challenge for life history researchers therefore implies that the subjective experiences of individuals are captured while the researcher attempts to see the world from the point of view of the research subjects, who are invited to participate in the construction of the research process (Bogdan and Biklen, 1998; Miller, 2000). As Krumer-Nevo (2009) indicates, 'giving voice' has quite recently entered the realm of poverty research, based on the idea that

> opening our ears to the voices of poor (. . .) is vital to the humanizing of citizens and institutions, including research (. . .) and offers a unique potential contribution to the overall corpus of knowledge because it reflects the point of view of people on the fringes of society concerning their own lives, as well as society and its primary institutions. (Krumer-Nevo, 2005: 99–100)

While taking this into account, we adopted a life history approach with a focus on capturing the interrelation between individual biography and social structures,

forces and resources available in societies, placing individual biographies in the broader public sphere (Clapham, 2003). As Bogdan and Biklen (1998: 25) assert: 'human beings are actively engaged in creating their world; understanding the intersection between biography and society is essential'. With regard to the balance between agency and structure, the focus on agency and the actions and decisions of people in poverty may all too easily lead to thrusting 'all of the responsibility for avoiding or escaping poverty onto those individuals experiencing it' (Alcock, 2004: 398); and therefore structural resources and redistributive forces remain crucially important key elements in these dynamic analyses of poverty (Lister, 2004; Millar, 2007). Here, 'subjectivity, the manner in which the respondent perceives his/her situation and activities in social structures and networks, is the very stuff of analysis' (Miller, 2000: 129).

However, our research endeavours were based on the assumption that human *experience* is intrinsically mediated by *interpretation* (Blumer, 1954; Schuyt, 1972). Life history research allows for an interpretation of the complex and dynamic ways in which material, social and cultural resources are viewed as opportunities and constraints for people to practice their agency, starting from the assumption that the individual 'contributes, however minutely, to the shaping of this society and to the course of its history, even as he [*sic*] is made by society and by its historical push and shove' (Roberts, 2002: 36). In that sense, we were inspired by the interpretive paradigm of lifeworld orientation (Otto and Thiersch, 2001; Roets et al., 2013). This approach was originally developed as a radical social criticism, challenging taken-for-granted institutional problem constructions that are wielding an alienating and colonizing influence on people's everyday experiences. As such, 'this understanding of the everyday with reference to its obstinacy, its alienation, its self-assertion and its aspirations' is linked to a social justice project (Grunwald and Thiersch, 2009: 132). This approach allowed us to take into account the contexts in which people's biographies are produced and the injustice of poverty situations that shape them (see Roets et al., 2013).

In the next sections, we discuss more concretely how we were implementing these research approaches and rationales, and how we attempted to deal with the challenges, complexities and dilemmas we encountered during our research process.

Methodological and ethical considerations

We adopted a life history approach in which the welfare strategies, struggles, hopes and aspirations of parents with young children who were moving into and out of poverty and their experiences with social work were explored in retrospective ways. Retrospective approaches to qualitative longitudinal poverty research involve the collection of data 'usually at one point in time, from respondents about their past experiences and life changes' (Alcock, 2004: 403), and can provide considerable detail about circumstances and structural resources and constraints. The research participants were recruited with the help of social work organizations that were

invited to ask families in which they intervened, and who experienced financial difficulties over time, whether they would participate. After (re-)negotiating and obtaining informed consent (Roose et al., 2016), open qualitative in-depth interviews were conducted with parents of young children who had experiences with a diversity of social work interventions. The families had several children with preferably one of their children being aged between zero and three years old. In the course of the research process, we interviewed 14 parents (ten mothers and four fathers) from nine different families, including parents who intermittently joined the conversation, yet nine parents (seven mothers and two fathers from seven families) were interviewed more extensively. Within a series of two to four conversations, which lasted one to five hours, parents storied their lives and their experiences of social work interventions. All 27 interviews were fully audiotaped and transcribed.

Although the impetus of the biographical turn in social work research has been to reconfigure the power relations implicated in knowledge production while emphasizing the participation of the research subjects in co-constructing knowledge, determining how to interpret and write about the research insights 'is in the hands of the researcher and not in the hands of the researched, the interviewed' (Krumer-Nevo, 2002: 305). Nevertheless, we follow Krumer-Nevo (2009: 282) who states that many scholars engage with participatory research approaches, 'but do not specify the process through which they had produced it (...). The role that people in poverty took in them is not clear'. For us, the life history research approach involved methodological and ethical complexities and ambiguities, which refer to the central importance of reflexivity for social work researchers (D'Cruz and Jones, 2004). These dilemmas, contradictions and ambiguities require that researchers develop the reflexive potential and the necessary openness to discuss their doubts and considerations emerging during the research process (Roose et al., 2016). In what follows, we reveal how power relations in the life history research project evolved in surprising ways, at different stages of the encounters with the parents.

Unforeseen complexities in the research process

The process of working together to (re)construct the parents' life histories steered us, by mutual agreement, to an attempt to visualize their life histories. This allowed us to deepen our understanding of the poverty situations in which the research participants were living, while documenting actual resources, events and key incidents at turning points (Millar, 2007). It was found that poverty consists of a multi-dimensional and complex problem, that can be characterized as a lack of material as well as immaterial (or social) resources (Lister, 2004), created by cumulative processes of social exclusion that result, in different periods of the lives of the research participants, in deprivation (Bouverne-De Bie, 2003).

Our life history approach resulted in a complex mosaic of life experiences, which were pieced together and contextualized through the construction of an individual life line in close collaboration with the parents. These life lines ran through each

research process as a common thread and were gradually corrected, elaborated and refined. This allowed us to gain a profound understanding of the ways in which transitions, and events and resources (including social work interventions) leading to these transitions, were experienced by these families.

In what follows, we present exemplary vignettes of the reconstructed and visualized life histories of three families, and discuss the complexities involved in the construction process. All illustrations are drawn from the research journal that was systematically kept by the first author – the 'I' in the following sections – who conducted the interviews.

Anna (and her boys) (Fig. 1)

Anna, 38 years old, was the first mother I contacted. At the time of the interviews, she lived together with her three children – two boys (13 and 15 years old) from a former relationship and a new-born girl with her current partner – at the basic flour of an apartment building. I recruited Anna with the help of a child and family social work organization, which intervened in her family more than 10 years ago. The support trajectory was described by the practitioners as very successful because of the tremendous improvement in the family situation on a financial as well as on a relational level.

In our first conversation, I invited Anna to talk about her family. Her story provided starting points to reflect on factual elements such as her current and former housing situation, education, employment and the family income. Back home, I tried to put together the many life fragments shared by Anna. Because she had told me she was very creative, I adopted the idea to draw a life line, based on the events she recounted during our initial meeting. This enabled me to organize and visualize Anna's life trajectory since her 18th birthday – a starting point she had chosen herself – and to detect possible blank spots: elements that confused me or I had to ask more about during our next conversation. At the second interview, I requested Anna to complete or correct the life line where she thought it would be

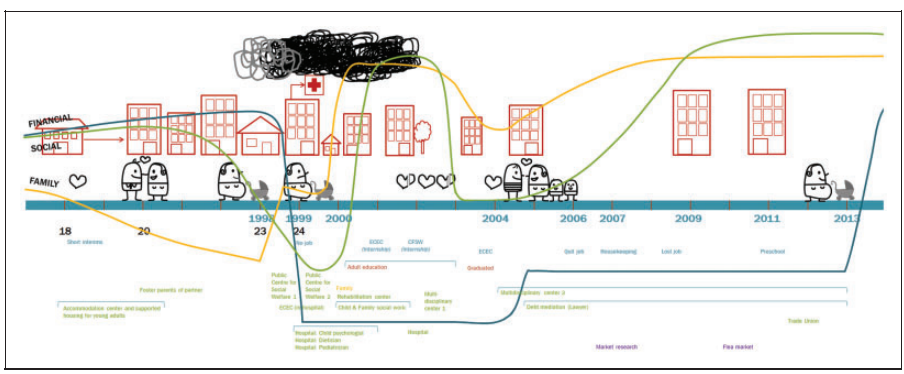

Figure 1. Life trajectory of Anna.

necessary. She told me, for instance, that the *'big black cloud'* – symbolizing a very dark period in her life – needed to have a larger size and should be preceded by a grey period. Also some dates and events had to be corrected and replaced. This process of working together to reconstruct and visualize Anna and her family's life trajectory, in the course of four interviews, not only made it possible to gain a more detailed picture of certain events. It also offered a means to deepen Anna's life story, explore her meaning making and to indicate and talk about material as well as immaterial transitions she and her family experienced. Besides profound financial dynamics, Anna also designated familial and social changes. Interestingly, at a social level she further distinguished different types of friendship, depending on the broader circumstances she found herself in at a certain period in life. While comparing current friendships with former ones, for instance at the time of the black cloud, she reflected:

> Well, you know? Now I have friends who understand me, but who are real friends. Back then, my friends were all in the same boat. I could find support with them, but the bonds of friendship I have now are totally different. They aren't built on this kind of support or on those problems anymore.

This demonstrated that the experienced transitions in life are often complex, multilayered and interrelated with other dynamics and life events. As we further discussed the diverse meanings and experiences behind the visualized life trajectory, as a social work researcher I also explicitly paid attention to Anna's view on formal resources, such as social work, and their perceived influence on processes of change.

Throughout this process of data collection, I had the feeling that Anna and I were riding a tandem. During each move, we were working together to follow and explore a route – a life trajectory – that only Anna could know and that she reconstructed during the narration. In this sense, she was in the driver's seat, choosing the paths forward and backward in time, making (sometimes unpredictable) connections between different roads, and using the brakes if the trip was taking too long. However, assuming that the 'authority' is therefore passed over to the informant would blur issues of power and bias entangled in each research process. Whereas the person in the backseat might not be able to see the road in front of her or to hold the steering wheel, she does impact the ride from the very start. Also during the interview, I certainly had an influence on the speed as well as on the content of the conversation. Based on my own preoccupations and research interests, I could slow down the narration by highlighting topics that drew my attention or by asking Anna to go back in her story. Since research is always politically and theoretically charged, also the questions I asked or didn't ask were certainly not neutral and influenced the construction and generation of knowledge. I did not knew the road, but I held a compass. Moreover, as is the case when riding a real tandem, during the research process an empathic and sensing interaction between the two bikers, or between the researcher and the respondent, was crucial in order to take the (sometimes difficult) turns smoothly, not to fall, and to stop the conversation when this seemed appropriate.

As the graphics demonstrated, Anna's life story – in relation to material and immaterial conditions – was complex and dynamic, and went over pits and bumps. The same could be said about the process of data collection, about our ride, which was confronted with some complexities and challenges. While life histories are most appealing when presented as a story with a beginning, middle and an end, the narration was not always expressed in a logical or coherent manner. I noticed that my research questions did not always result in the expected answers. Sometimes there were memory issues, holes in the road. Sometimes, Anna consciously avoided going into detail about certain pits in her life trajectory. Although some elements could consequently not be included, based on ethical considerations I left room for detours.

Also the research environment brought some challenges. Most conversations took place at Anna's house. During many of our meetings, she simultaneously had to watch over her children. Since the house was rather small, there was no place we could talk in private. Consequently, Anna's story was often interrupted by her crying baby or by playing youngsters. I also noticed that the boys were listening very attentively to every word we were saying and sometimes even joined the conversation. For example, on the third visit, Anna suggested to let the conversation take place outside of the house, at the terrace. During the interview, the boys now and then came to show their toys, captured insects or interfered in the conversation. On one occasion, Anna told me:

> Anna: If we would have made use of debt mediation sooner, I doubt if we would have ended up all that well. We might have lost our boosting moments, the tiny things – like going shopping or going on a trip – that could make you think: We had a nice day. The money has run out, but we had a nice day. We can cope again.
> Luke, who was obviously eavesdropping: Mom, I'm glad that you are talking from the heart.
> Anna: (laughs) I know, it's scary if you hear all of this. Yes, I know.
> Luke: Mom, we were almost hobos, then.
> Anna: Yes! (laughs)
> Luke: You did say that we could only buy some bread. So . . .?
> Anna: But you have had everything.

I became aware of the fact that the narration and visualization of the family's life trajectory, that went over pits and bumps, might be confronting as well as familiar to each family member. Moreover, they clearly all have their say on life events, from their own perspective.

Wendy and Tom (Fig. 2 and 3)

I was brought into contact with Wendy and Tom, both 33 years old, with the help of a child and family social work organization that almost ended its intervention in their family. At the time of the interviews, the couple had three children: a boy,

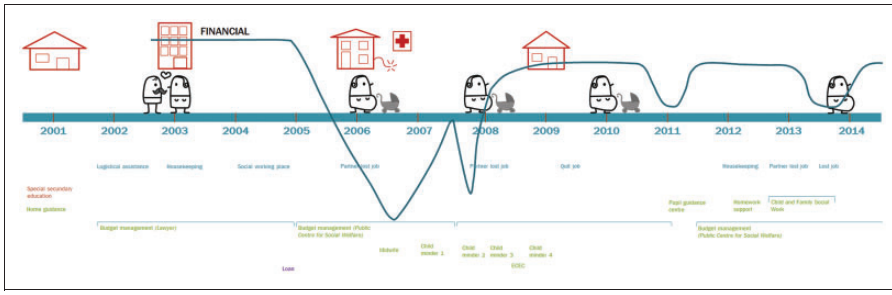

Figure 2. Life trajectory of Wendy.

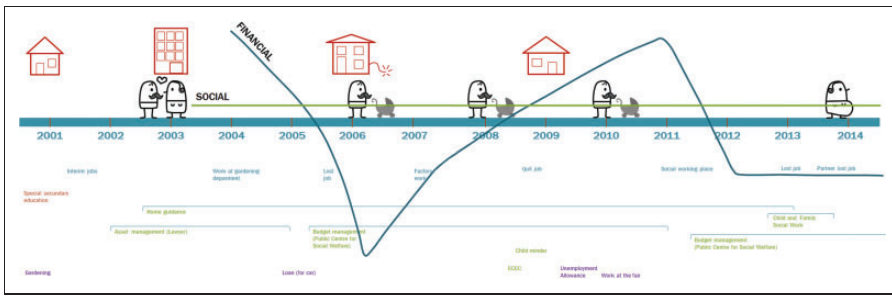

Figure 3. Life trajectory of Tom.

seven years of age, and two daughters of respectively three and five years old. Since both parents confirmed that they wanted to be engaged in the research project, I suggested that maybe we could arrange separate encounters. I reasoned that, this way, their own meaning-making about transitions and support could be maximally valued. Eventually I had three conversations with each of both parents.

I first met Wendy. When I entered the living room, she was busy ironing. Although the place didn't seem messy to me, she apologized for the fact that she hadn't cleaned yet. Wendy also spontaneously showed me some of their kids' toys, which she extensively demonstrated. A little later, I got a tour around the bedrooms of the children. We took the time to admire some more toys and she drew my attention to a water stain above the window. Back downstairs she taught me how to fabricate short summer pants out of worn-out winter trousers and how to creatively fix the holes with patches from a low budget store. I could not get rid of the impression that Wendy wanted to prove to me that she's a good mother. Maybe she was first of all proud of what she is able to give to her children despite difficult living conditions. Maybe she was nervous about the interview and didn't really know how to react. Or, maybe, her spontaneous, rather defensive attitude said something about how she was used to being approached by social services. An hour passed before I could find an occasion to explain why I actually came

to visit her. Until then, I kept the recording device switched off. This unexpected start of the interview exemplified how the mother and I were entangled in subjective processes of interpretation, based on the perceptions of the other, our own positioning, and the focus of our meeting. While clarifying our main topics of interest, during the following conversations Wendy and I together (re)constructed and visualized her life trajectory. Again, this process provided useful tools to deepen the talk about experiences of life events, transitions and support.

The research process I followed with Wendy's partner, Tom, was much alike. Also the facts and figures both parents mentioned showed many resemblances. For instance, they both mentioned living on a '*ticking time bomb*', while referring to formerly bad and very unsafe housing conditions. Tom and Wendy did however not always focus as much on the same happenings or interventions. Moreover, also their corresponding experiences and interpretations of life events sometimes profoundly differed. The latter was clearly illustrated at the occasion when Tom told me without euphoria that Wendy was pregnant again.

> I still have to overcome this. But it's easier said than done, overcoming this. (silence) I do admit it, it's hard for me. (...) There are going to be four of them ... Three was already a lot, but four! For me, that's something ... For me, that's too much.

A couple of moments later, after Tom had shared his view on the new family situation, Wendy entered the room. She was shining. Because, at that moment, I was there to listen to the meaning-making of Tom, I decided to primarily focus on his perspective and to greet Wendy the way I normally did, without referring to her pregnancy. During the further course of the conversation, Wendy stayed around. She repeatedly passed by the table, gave me something to drink and finally enthusiastically asked me if Tom has already shared the big news. I wanted to equally respect both perspectives, but because they seemed to directly opposing each other, I found this quite difficult. Eventually, I decided to honestly answer her question – while trying not to choose sides – and then turned again to Tom.

Emily (Fig. 4)

Emily (35 years old) is the mother of one teenage daughter from a former relationship and two younger daughters with her current partner, Steve (30 years old). At the moment of the interviews, the children were respectively 13 years, four years and two years of age. I was brought into contact with the family by the same child and family social work organization that also recruited Wendy and Tom. The practitioner told me that the support trajectory in Emily's family had been difficult, and would probably be interrupted or concluded.

On the telephone, Emily indicated that she wanted to participate in the research ('*I have much to tell!*'), but at the same time also made sure she would immediately withdraw if she wouldn't like it. This condition was totally in line with what I wanted to suggest to her in the informed consent. At my first visit, after

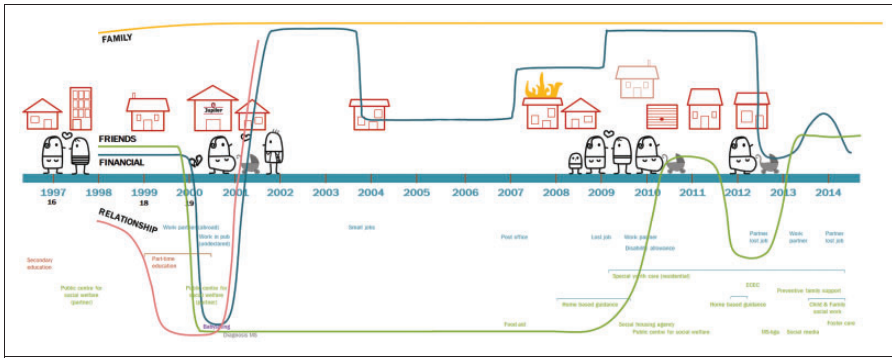

Figure 4. Life trajectory of Emily.

explaining the research content, I asked Emily and Steve if it would be possible to make audio-recordings of our conversation. Steve shrugged his shoulders, but Emily didn't respond to my question and immediately started to voice her story. Because the answer to my earlier request had remained blank, I tried to repeat the question:

> I: Emily, may I interrupt you for a second? What you are telling me is quite interesting, but I'm afraid that I will forget some of it if I can't record it or write it down, so I would like to ask you . . .
> Emily: Ah, you think that it is interesting, peoples' misery? Do you make a lot of money out of it?

I consequently decided not to turn on the recording device, but to listen very carefully. During the conversation, that eventually took almost four hours, Emily was very open and lively expressed her perspectives on social interventions. 'It seems like you're a friend who comes to visit us', she laughed towards the end of the interview, 'I can immediately feel it, when there's a connection'. When saying goodbye and considering the next visit, I asked Emily to think again about my request concerning the audio recordings, which had still been left unanswered. An affirmative nod. 'You're still willing to come back?', she grinned. At the second meeting, a week later, the audio recording of the conversation no longer appeared to be an issue.

This illustration reflects struggles over power issues inherent to every research, but 'intensified in research settings where gaps in the social ladder between researcher and researched are evident' (Wolf, 1996 in Krumer-Nevo, 2002). It demonstrates the processes of negotiation, which may even start before the first encounter, wherein people actively attempt to (re)define themselves, their position and their relationship with the other (Krumer-Nevo, 2002). Also the focus of the research was the object of shared discussion and (re-)interpretation. For instance,

in one of our meetings, Emily explained how she understood the meaning and contribution of the research project:

> I'm going to give you an example. You like to eat chocolate paste. Nutella, for instance. (I'm choosing Nutella, just because it is a popular brand.) But – probably by conducting some studies – they consider that the brand doesn't sell enough and they consequently withdraw it from the market. Likewise, there are things, let's say in the Aldi (it doesn't necessarily have to apply to expensive products) that you really, really like, but that they suddenly decide to stop selling. They don't bother to ask us if we want it to disappear from the market. They conduct some kind of study and then they say that the return on investments isn't big enough. But in the meantime, we lost our products! So, actually more people should be involved. Well, in fact, that is what you are doing: you are ensuring that we can keep the chocolate.

While (re)constructing her trajectory and discussing the 'chocolate' (in this case, supportive interventions) that have played a significant role in her life, Emily also identified and visualized experienced transitions, materially as well as immaterially. Surprisingly, with regard to the fact that she had been homeless and lived with her partner in a garage for a period in time, Emily did not indicate a deterioration in her financial situation. When I wondered about her underlying interpretations and meaning-making, she clarified that, while being homeless and living without water and electricity:

> We still had an income and less expenses since we didn't have to pay a high rent, water nor electricity bills. However, because we also weren't able to cook dinner, we always had to buy fast food. At that point, our expenses were a bit higher, but overall I guess that the financial balance must have stayed the same.

Concluding reflections

Until recently, poor people's personal stories and experiences were often perceived among researchers mainly as anecdotal, as stories to be used in tokenistic ways rather than as a source of knowledge (Beresford, 2000; Roose et al., 2016). While reflecting on our research process, we were able to notice a shift from 'giving voice' to a more collaborative attempt to generate and co-construct 'knowledge' with the parents and families involved. It might be argued that our research process entails a transition from talking *at* to talking *with* people in poverty (ATD Fourth world, 1996 in Krumer-Nevo, 2009). Krumer-Nevo (2009: 290) describes this shift as 'the treating of the voices of the inside-researchers as knowledge [which] requires that researchers think anew not only about the content of their research but also about its form'. She asserts that treating people in poverty as having knowledge is the acknowledgement that they do not have only personal experiences 'but they do also have thoughts, sometimes critical ones, ideas and recommendations, and they are

capable of analyzing and theorizing their situations, even if they do it in nonacademic language' (Krumer-Nevo, 2009: 291).

However, our research process also reflects how this attempt in our life history research project implies that the empirical fieldwork evolved in very complex and even chaotic ways. The research participants were, for instance, challenging the original research intentions of the researchers and presented a more complicated and multifaceted picture of transitions into and out of poverty. They showed that 'transitions are not necessarily temporally fixed, discrete and clearly definable events' (Millar, 2007: 6). Whereas a lack of material resources appeared as a constant element in each parent's life trajectory and hence seemed to constitute the roots of the problem of poverty (see Mestrum, 2011), the research participants' accounts also revealed how social, cultural, relational, symbolic and material dimensions and resources are always intrinsically interrelated.

Furthermore, the parents taught us that the power disparity and asymmetry between the researcher and the research subjects is not only inevitable during the process of capturing the experiences of people in poverty, but also generates struggles and ambiguities in the interpretation of these experiences. The latter became very palpable in the case of Emily, who – unexpectedly for the researchers – did not seem to associate a period of homelessness with a downward movement, financially nor socially. From a plain conception of capturing peoples' voice and knowledge about poverty as neutral facts, we could accordingly draw the conclusion that, in this situation, no problems were at stake; the families' available income didn't drop and creative strategies for survival were deployed. Yet, an examination of Emily's meaning making in relation to social resources revealed issues – such as the lack of a decent housing, water and electricity – that ought to be problematized from a perspective of human rights and social justice (Grunwald and Thiersch, 2009).

In interpreting our research findings, we accordingly struggled with the complexity of doing justice to peoples' accounts about transitions into and out of poverty, while it became apparent that, as social work researchers, we inevitably had to make choices that will never be totally neutral nor value free (Roose et al., 2016). Notwithstanding the open-ended and dialogic construction of the research process, researchers eventually consider 'which questions to ask, which secrets to keep, and which truths are worth telling' (Ellis, 2007: 26). Therefore, rather than pretending that power imbalances and the challenges they generate can simply be disguised by using a biographical research approach, we make a plea for a reflexive stance in poverty research, so that choices inherent to each research project can be made explicit, legitimized and open to debate. As Spyrou (2011: 162) concludes aptly:

> No single method can guarantee successful representation in itself. Reflexive research however accepts the messiness, ambiguity, polyvocality, non-factuality and multilayered nature of meaning in 'stories' that research produce. The quick and easy way is not necessary the most ethical way; the ethical way necessitates time for reflection.

This also implies that a key issue in research is not to avoid having a particular research agenda or to seek for a power-free research space. More important is to recognize and make explicit which research agenda you do have and to continuously consider, discuss and engage with the unpredictable ethical challenges – the pits and bumps – that come with the power-relations that are inherent to conducting research.

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